

# T<sup>3</sup>: Trustee Training Tips

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## GOOD MANNERS OR GOOD BUSINESS?

Most of us never intend to be rude. We were taught it was wrong, and being southerners, we hold it somewhat a kin to a sacred duty. But sometimes good manners may get in the way of good business practices—especially when it comes to keeping unproductive board members on for an additional term or terms.

A quick aside: Why would we refer to additional terms when the law (KRS 173.340; 173.490; 173.730) clearly states a trustee may only serve two consecutive terms? Because anyone appointed to fill out the unexpired term of another board member can still have two full terms of his or her own to serve.

However, the time will come for most boards to face the unpleasant task of dealing with the expiration of a term that legally could be renewed, but.... The problems that could potentially follow the “but” are several:

- ☛ attends, but doesn’t really participate in meetings
- ☛ never contributes ideas; too passive
- ☛ takes over meetings; intimidates free discussion
- ☛ railroads own ideas through; too aggressive
- ☛ contentious or difficult to get along with
- ☛ not trustworthy; appears to have own agenda in conflict with the good of the library

With library boards already small in number (most are only five) even one trustee who doesn’t contribute is far too great a percentage of your whole board slipping beneath the bar. Can you afford, for the good of the library, to keep non-productive members filling your seats? If not, what can you do about it?

No one said this would be pleasant, but it falls to the board president to tactfully dissuade a trustee who is not doing the job to remove his name from consideration. Too often what really happens is the director announces that Terry Trustee’s term is about to expire and all turn to her while someone asks, “Do you want to stay on the board?” Even those who know they aren’t contributing—and most of the time they do know who they are—will say, “If you all want me to I will.” [*uncomfortable pause*] and then Terry Trustee’s name is submitted again.

No trustee’s term should be an automatic renewal. All reappointments need to be taken seriously and voted on by the whole board. Skills needed the coming year may be quite different from what was needed four years ago. Keep the good of the library always foremost in your deliberations.

## MANAGING MEETINGS

Page one discussed non-productive board members and the need to deal with them decisively. But before board presidents start “firing” trustees right and left, there are methods to use to see if they can be rehabilitated first. It behooves any board to train its members in boardsmanship before giving up on them. There are several ways to go about doing this.

KDLA provides regional consultant services to all regions, though admittedly they are stretched thin due to vacancies in the agency, to help with providing orientation for new trustees. No reason these can't be refresher sessions for experienced trustees as well. A typical orientation from a regional consultant deals with board expectations and general duties of trustees—not library specific items. For these, one must rely on the library director and another board member to provide the details, but again, no need to limit them to brand new trustees if a refresher is needed for the seasoned crew as well.

Following orientations, a board member is ready to attend Trustee Institutes offered each summer by KDLA; programs at the KLA fall conference; and programs at the KPLA/KLTA spring conference. Not sure what all the acronyms means? Well, that's probably a good clue that you need some refresher training. Not sure which programs to attend? Ask your director which are most likely to be beneficial to trustees. And don't overlook workshops just for trustees in your own region. Times and locations frequently change on these, but publicity is always sent to alert you to them.

In addition to the formal training opportunities listed above, just good management of the monthly board meetings can assist a weak trustee in correcting “bad”

behavior. This is usually up to the person chairing the meeting—most likely the board president.

Before discussing some specific strategies for dealing with problems, one basic rule needs to be stressed. Each board should have agreed upon expectations of behavior and how breeches of these expectations will be handled. That settled, let's deal with the too passive board member.

Some people are just naturally reticent to speak up. The chair must respect this, but set up a climate that increases the comfort level for the shy. A good approach to involving a silent type is to ask him a direct question—one that he can answer easily. Then probe for more details. This cannot be successfully done unless the overall climate is one where members feel unintimidated. There is no place for attack in a library board meeting—not people and not their ideas. Enforce those rules of behavior you established earlier.

If your board has chronic silent members, another trustee may need to approach each one privately to ask if they are benefiting from attending the meetings and to find out if there is any way the meetings can be conducted to make them more effective for all.

The too aggressive trustee may express herself by being too talkative—controlling the discussion; irritating or intimidating others; or just plain long-winded. Ignoring them will not make them go away. The best way to handle behavioral problems with adults is to start with the most subtle and then increase force as necessary. Start with non-verbal cues. A common signal to finish quickly is to hold up one's hand, palm outward towards the chatty speaker.

Accompanied with a smile, it shouldn't offend a reasonable person. Taking the action slowly, rather than thrusting the hand forward too quickly is another way to soften the signal.

Another non-verbal tactic is the "Aha" signal. This consists of one finger held up, implying you are enthusiastic about the point he has just made. This signal is accompanied by a comment that allows you to interrupt politely—and no, that is not an oxymoron in this case. Such a comment may be, "Tom, your point about overdue is a good one. I'd like to hear what Sally has to say about that idea." Obviously it helps if you were getting some cues from Sally that she had an opinion on the subject. If the other board members seem clueless on a subject, look to your library director for a comment. It is best to redirect the discussion at a time when your long-winded speaker is taking a breath.

If the more subtle approaches don't work, then something more direct will have to be employed. For example, interrupt with, "Tom, we have several more important items on today's agenda that must be addressed. I appreciate your comments, but I am going to have to insist we move on. Perhaps, if we have time, we can come back to this at the end." Then move immediately on to the next agenda item. Keep in mind this approach may hurt some feelings and it may be necessary to speak privately to the long-winded person after the meeting adjourns to explain why you felt this was necessary. Moving the agenda along falls to the board president and is one of the most important skills he or she can have.

So far, we have dealt with unproductive behaviors that merely irritate us. Handling disputes is a bit more serious. All conflict is not bad. How good would any novel be without it? Conflict can make for a lively

meeting that is quite productive—if it is funneled into developing solutions and not feeding problems. Disputes can arise for a number of reasons that are not related to the business under discussion. They may be about personal agendas, control, or stylistic differences. These may be identified by lack of listening, personal attacks or innuendo, or hostile tones of voice. Library board meetings are not the place to bring these to the table.

First, the person chairing the meeting should avoid taking sides. Second, stop the dispute early. As soon as you see signs that the discussion is becoming non-constructive, jump in and stop it. Third, don't become emotionally involved. React calmly, not with anger or alarm. Finally, if none of the above works and the discussion appears to be leading to an altercation, recess the meeting. If a short break doesn't cool tempers, then adjourn the meeting. Nothing positive is going to happen in such an atmosphere anyway.

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## LIBRARY LETTERS

*Dear Marian Librarian,*

*Is there ever a situation that is a conflict of interest other than the ones listed in the statutes?*

*– Troubled Trustee*

Dear Troubled,

There could be, but first let's review those defined in statute (KRS 173.340; 510; 740), which are the sale of books, magazines, supplies, equipment, materials, insurance, or services. But, there could be situations where a trustee might have a conflict of interest, or the *appearance* of a conflict of interest, and not be breaking this law. An example would be influencing the board to send business to a friend when it is not the cheapest or best quality route. Remember, you do not have to bid projects under \$20,000 nor any personal services. Pressuring the director to hire a friend is another example. Every trustee needs to be 100% sure he or she is not using the board position to pursue a personal agenda.

## HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW?

The following quiz will let you test your knowledge on the topics covered in this publication. The answers are under "Publications" on KDLA's web page <[www.kdla.ky.gov](http://www.kdla.ky.gov)>.

1. Who decides whether or not a trustee should serve another term and what factors are used to make the determination?
2. Name three types of non-productive board members.
3. How might one go about training trustees in good boardsmanship?
4. Name at least one strategy for dealing with board members that are too passive; too aggressive; and outright disruptive.
5. Who determines the success or lack thereof of a board meeting? Why?

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